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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000619

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH PATRIARCH ALEKSEY II

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 4, the Ambassador met with the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Aleksey II. The Patriarch discussed the relations between the Orthodox Church and the government, and its growing social role. The Patriarch spoke of cooperative relations among the four "traditional religions" in Russia and the more strained relations between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. Aleksey downplayed incidents of xenophobia and ethnic violence. End Summary.

#### Church-State Relations

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¶2. (C) In a March 4 meeting with the Ambassador, Aleksey II, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), noted that the church was continuing to grow and was successful in reaching out to new generations of Russians. He said that the ROC had a growing role in education and health care, and that even though the church and state were separate, their cooperation on social issues was beneficial for the Russian people.

¶3. (C) Aleksey characterized the church's relationship with President Putin as strong, and that he thought that relationship would continue with Medvedev. He recounted his visit with Putin to the Butovskiy cemetery outside Moscow, where the Soviet government during the Stalin era executed more than 26,000 people, many of them affiliated with the church. "The visit made a very strong impression on the President - to hear about such a crime is one thing, but to be there and see the graves is another. It is very important that we never forget what was done," said Aleksey.

#### The Church's Role in Health Care

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¶4. (C) The ROC is taking a greater role in health care, "approaching the body from both sides - physical and spiritual." Aleksey said that the ROC is expanding its work on HIV/AIDS, which he described as "a serious problem, but not the catastrophe that it is in Africa." He said that this problem required medical and spiritual attention, and he attributed the spread of the disease primarily to drug users and "moral degradation." Aleksey welcomed cooperation between the U.S. and Russia in combating HIV/AIDS, both in Russia and in other places around the world.

#### Interfaith Relations

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¶5. (C) The Patriarch noted that relations among the four "traditional faiths" (Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism) were very strong and based upon mutual respect. The Interfaith Council, founded in 1998, provided the forum for continued discussion and cooperation.

16. (C) Relations with the Roman Catholic Church, however, were still troubled. Aleksey noted that he had not yet met with Pope Benedict XVI, but "I hope that even at my advanced age I will be able to meet with him." Aleksey said that the major point of disagreement between the Orthodox and Catholic churches was over proselytization. He said that the first meeting between him and the Pope "should not be for the cameras, but should be substantive, based on extensive preparation, and result in an agreement that condemns proselytizing among our followers." He said that the ROC had no problems with the Catholic Church taking care of its people who happen to live in Russia, but that proselytization was "intolerable."

17. (C) Aleksey continued that the Orthodox-Catholic agreement should promote "Christian values" such as the sanctity of marriage and the primacy of the family, which were both morally right and an antidote for the demographic crises faced by Russia and the rest of Europe. Aleksey condemned the "Gay Parade" held in Moscow last year, and asserted that it was the role of the church to explain that homosexuality, like kleptomania, was deviant behavior.

#### Xenophobia and Ethnic Violence

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18. (C) Aleksey downplayed incidents of xenophobia and ethnic violence in Russia, saying that Russia "is doing everything possible" not to discriminate on skin color or ethnicity. He pointed to the multi-national composition of the Russian population that was evident on the streets and in the universities. He said that the church was concerned about hate crimes, but noted that it was also concerned about the

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many murders - regardless of ethnicity - committed for any motive. (Aleksey's comments come against the background of 36 members of ethnic minorities killed in nationalist hate-crimes since January 1, according to human rights activists.)

#### Bio Notes

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19. (C) The Patriarch, who turned 79 last month, appeared to be steady and strong, and in better health than he has been in the past three years.

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